



# NAVY HISTORY MATTERS

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Welcome to Navy History Matters—our weekly compilation of articles, commentaries, and blogs related to history and heritage. Every week we'll gather the top-interest items from a variety of media and social media sources and then link you to related content at NHHC's website ([history.navy.mil](http://history.navy.mil)), your authoritative source for Navy history.

## ★ Naval Academy Celebrates 175 Years

This year commemorates 175 years of the [United States Naval Academy](#) in Annapolis, MD. On Jan. 28 at the Maryland State House, Governor [Larry Hogan](#) presented the Naval Academy a proclamation that officially kicks off the yearlong celebration. "One of our most treasured traditions is our friendship with the great city of Annapolis and our home state of Maryland," said Superintendent Vice Adm. [Sean Buck](#). "Over the years we've built a phenomenal relationship with our surrounding community and are grateful to the people of Annapolis and the state of Maryland for embracing the academy and our midshipmen." "The Naval School" was established on Oct. 10, 1845, on a 10-acre Army post in Annapolis called Fort Severn. There were initially 50 students and seven faculty members. Today, the campus is 338 acres; the student body has grown to nearly 4,400; and the faculty is more than 1,200. For more, [read the U.S Naval Academy release](#).



## ★ Essex First to Cross Equator

On Feb. 7, 1800, 220 years ago, the frigate [Essex](#) became the first U.S. Navy vessel to cross the equator. The frigate [Congress](#) and [Essex](#)—with Capt. [Edward Preble](#) in command—set sail with a convoy of merchantmen for the East Indies in January 1800, but six days out [Congress](#) lost her mast in a gale and had to return home. [Essex](#) continued the voyage. The ship made her mark as the first U.S. man-of-war to double the Cape of Good Hope, in March and August 1800. After cruising for a few months around the Straits of Sunda protecting American trade from French privateers, [Essex](#) sailed for home with a convoy of 14 vessels, arriving in New York in November. After the voyage, [Essex](#) continued—under different commanders—to [protect American trade and seamen](#) against depredations by the Barbary Powers in the Mediterranean until peace terms were finalized in 1806.



## ★ The Legend of Philo McGiffin

[Philo McGiffin](#)—U.S. Naval Academy Class of 1882—was known for his mischief as a midshipman. In the 1880s, there were more graduates than officer billets, so McGiffin was denied a commission and sent home. Still determined to pursue a naval career, he offered his services to China and was accepted. He became a Chinese naval officer, superintendent of the Chinese Naval Academy, and commander of Chinese battleship [Chen Yuen](#), which fought in the Battle of Yalu in 1894. His heroic actions during the battle cemented McGiffin's reputation as a man of wit, grit, and courage who inspired midshipmen well into the 20th century. For more, [listen to the Preble Hall podcast](#). USNA Museum's curator Grant Walker discusses McGiffin's legend and life.



## ★ Legacy by Navy Legend, Continues with Son

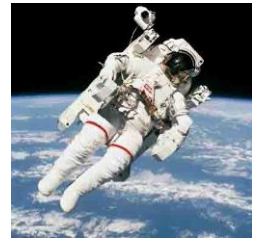
Every time Phillip Brashear straps on the leather band of his watch, he thinks of his father. "My dad's famous saying was, 'It's not a sin to get knocked down. It's a sin to stay down.'" Those are the words etched on the back of the wristwatch. They surround an image of a Mark V diver suit helmet. It was made to honor his father [Carl Brashear](#), who was the first [African-American](#) Navy diver in 1954. In 1970, as an amputee following a tragic accident, he qualified as the first African-American master diver. Brashear's son, a helicopter pilot in the U.S. Army Reserve, has more than 38 years of military service. Brashear teased his father when he was alive about his job. "I get to be a helicopter pilot. I go



up, not down,” he said. “My daddy would say, ‘Aw, get the heck out of my face. ... Remember son, there’s always divers looking for pilots. There’s never pilots looking for [divers](#).’” For more, [read the article](#) at DVIDS.

### ★ First Untethered Spacewalk

On Feb. 7, 1984, [Bruce McCandless](#), naval aviator and astronaut, made the first untethered spacewalk from the space shuttle *Challenger* in the first test of the manned maneuvering unit. McCandless used hand controls to regulate his movement from a nitrogen-propelled backpack apparatus that allowed free movement in space. Fellow crewmembers used a 70mm camera to take the famous photograph through windows on the flight deck. The use of the [mobile foot restraint](#) (MFR) attached to the shuttle’s remote manipulator system arm was also used for the first time on this mission. Known as the “cherry-picker,” the MFR provides a stable platform so astronauts can stand wherever they need to work outside the spacecraft. For more on the [Navy’s role in space exploration](#), go to [NHHC’s website](#).



### ★ CT Governor Receives Keepsakes From Uncle’s Service

For 65 years, Connecticut Gov. [Ned Lamont](#)’s father displayed a photo of his older brother next to his bed. He was lost while serving onboard [USS Snook](#) during [World War II](#). Last week, the governor himself was reminded of his uncle—Thomas W. Lamont II—when officials at [Naval Submarine Base New London](#) in Groton, CT, presented him with memorabilia from his uncle’s [submarine](#). He received copies of *Snook*’s 1944 Christmas menu and a thank you note sent by the commanding officer’s wife to each crewmember. Lamont also held a piece of *Snook*’s periscope that fell off after it hit one of its escort boats when it departed for its ninth and final war patrol. *Snook* was presumed lost with all hands on May 16, 1945, in the South China Sea and Luzon Strait, after repeated attempts to contact and search for the submarine were to no avail. For more, [read the article](#) in *U.S. News & World Report*.



### ★ Flying in Iraq on the First Night of War

It was March 20, 2003, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq—dubbed [Operation Iraqi Freedom](#)—had kicked off. [HH-60 Seahawk helicopter](#) pilot Chris Harmer and his fellow [naval aviators](#), along with two Polish snipers, had an important mission that night—provide security for a small flotilla of U.S. Navy riverine craft clearing the waterway that connects the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr to the Persian Gulf. The waterway needed to be secured as quickly as possible to allow heavy cargo ships in so they could support troops on the ground. During [Desert Storm](#), Saddam Hussein’s forces left Kuwait ablaze by setting hundreds of oil and gas wells on fire. Securing Umm Qasr was crucial in preventing Hussein’s retreating forces from sabotaging the port. That night, the team launched from a small, transient base located about ten miles south of the Iraqi border. For more on the mission, [read the article](#).



### ★ Philippines Retires Former Korean War U.S. Minesweeper

On Jan. 30, the Philippine navy decommissioned a former U.S. Navy minesweeper that earned five battle stars during the [Korean War](#). The corvette BRP *Rizal* was retired to make way for a more modern fleet. *Rizal* began her service as [USS Murrelet](#) when she was commissioned in August 1945. The ship operated around Japan and Korea until it was mothballed in 1946. At the onset of the Korean War, *Murrelet* returned to service, destroying shore-based artillery batteries and capturing or destroying enemy sampans. In December 1964, the ship was retired, and, in June 1965, sent to the Philippines under a military assistance program. The ship served 55 years with the Philippine navy. For more, [read the article](#).



### ★ WWII Veteran Shares His Story of Survival

Retired Marine Sgt. Edgar Harrell has a story to tell. Not just any story, but one filled with violence, tragedy, and courage, along with some luck and faith. On July 30, 1945, Harrell was onboard [USS Indianapolis](#) in the final days of [World War II](#) when Japanese torpedoes hit the ship, sinking her in minutes. “I made my (bunk) underneath the barrels of the No. 1 turret and that first torpedo cut the bow of the ship off,” said Harrell. “When I say cut off, if you could visualize that long sleek bow—about 30 feet of that is cut off and it’s two-and-a-half decks deep.” He said the ship began taking on huge amounts of water. The majority of the more than 800 Sailors and Marines



who went into the water died from wounds sustained in the torpedo explosions that sunk the ship and by drowning. “I speak all over the country, and I want people to see and realize and know that service men have made it possible for us to be where we are in America today.” For more, [read the article](#). For more on the [sinking of USS Indianapolis](#), go to [NHHC’s website](#).

### ★ County’s Last Pearl Harbor Survivor Dies at 100

Frank Wasniewski of Hudson County in New Jersey passed away Jan. 21 at 100 years old. He was the county’s last link to the [Pearl Harbor attack](#) that propelled the United States into [World War II](#). Wasniewski was stationed with the 98th Coast Artillery at Schofield Barracks about 35 minutes north of Pearl Harbor but, on that day, he was at the Navy yard to pick up ammunition. “They bombed for two hours,” said Wasniewski in an interview conducted earlier. “It was brutal.” Wasniewski was drafted on March 26, 1941, and had planned to serve only a year. He ended up serving four and a half. For more, [read the article](#).



### ★ NHHC Webpage of the Week

This week’s Webpage of the Week is new to NHHC’s website. The [Namesakes](#) page highlights notable people who have had U.S. Navy ships named in their honor. In celebration of [African-American/Black History Month](#), this month the page features selected African Americans. Navy Cook First Class William Pinckney reported to [USS Enterprise](#) after completing boot camp and “A” School. On Oct. 26, 1942, an explosion killed four of the six men at his battle station.



Pinckney and the other surviving Sailor attempted to exit through a hatch, but the other Sailor fell unconscious. Despite the suffocating smoke, flames, and gasoline fumes, Pinckney picked up the unconscious Sailor and brought him to safety. Pinckney was one of only four African Americans to receive the [Navy Cross](#) during [World War II](#). Guided missile destroyer USS *Pinckney* (DDG-91) is named in his honor. Pinckney is just one person highlighted on the new namesakes page. Check out the rest.

### ★ Today in Naval History

On Feb. 4, 1779, Capt. [John Paul Jones](#) took command of [Bonhomme Richard](#) (formally *Duc de Duras*), which was given to the United States by King Louis XVI of France. The name honors Benjamin Franklin, the American commissioner at Paris whose *Poor Richard’s Almanac* was published in France under the title *Les Maximes du Bonhomme Richard*. It would be several months later until Jones had the ship ready to sail. The crew—selected and recruited by Jones—represented a variety of nationalities and languages, hailing from the American colonies, France, Scotland, Ireland, Italy, Norway, India, and even England. Unsurprisingly, they often quarreled among themselves, and Jones faced discipline problems even before the ship set sail. A group of Englishmen, who had signed on to escape from French prisons, plotted to kill Jones and seize control of the ship. Once Jones learned of the plan, the ringleader was hauled before a court martial and was dealt 250 lashes with a cat-o-nine-tails. Jones ended up dismissing more than 100 English Sailors because of the ordeal.



For more dates in naval history, including your selected span of dates, see [Year at a Glance](#) at [NHHC’s website](#). Be sure to check this page regularly, as content is updated frequently.